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AUTHOR Ostro, Gaby
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ABSTRACT

The Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal, recognizing that the community is dramatically affected by school closings, adopted a policy for dealing with declining enrollment that requires involvement of local school communities in examining the problem, helping to find solutions, and planning for the future. When a school's population falls below 60 percent of capacity, the community is informed of an impending study and invited to participate. A general meeting is held where parents are given basic data and asked to form a study group. This group, utilizing data provided by the planning office, prepares recommendations for the school board, which reserves the final decision-making authority concerning school closure or reorganization. Three school communities have successfully conducted this type of study. In both Westbrook and Connaught only a single school was involved. In Dorval, four combined in a community wide study. Experience with the process has led to a number of recommendations. To assure accurate dissemination of information, studies should begin with a general meeting of parents rather than merely a school committee meeting. Also community groups ought to have more direct input. Principals could benefit from help and support from colleagues who have gone through the process. The process should take at least ten months. (Author/JM)

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MAJOR SCHOOL CHANGE POLICY

A Model for Community Involvement in Declining Enrollment

The problems created by declining student enrollment are widespread and therefore familiar to anyone connected with public education. School systems, in considering methods of approach to the problem, must analyze all of the ramifications of student decline. The influences on educational delivery and on school board finances do not overshadow social and community implications. The human element is so much a part of the problem that emotional reactions, outcrys and demonstrations are predictable components when school closings are advocated as solutions.

School closings are an inevitable outcome of the steady child population decline but the question must be asked whether it is the only solution and whether it is wise under certain circumstances. What situations readily permit the closing of a school and the transfer of students to a nearby school or schools? How can a school board arrive at a solution that takes into account the various facets of the problem? Is the problem exclusively in the domain of the school board?

The school board is in a position to define and articulate the educational consequences of dropping enrollment. If, in the opinion of the professionals, decline below a given number produces problems in the delivery of quality education then that must be clearly stated. The school board must judge its own economic situation vis a vis the services it can provide to exceptionally small schools. The term "small schools" needs to be defined in a local context.(1)

While the educational and the resulting financial considerations are central to the concern and responsibility of the school board, the community is faced with the fallout from whatever action is taken. The community is concerned with the educational services and with the finances since they need the services and are at the same time the taxpayers but they are also affected by the social consequences of school closing or reorganization.

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For instance, it can be argued that in some areas real estate values decline when the school is closed. In others the effect of closing is essentially social, where the school has served as the center of a community, providing a meeting place for a variety of age groups. There are differences between communities and these must be recognized and properly assessed.

History of the Policy.

The community is the most dramatically affected by school closings and other major changes. It was in recognition of this fact, combined with the growing problem of declining enrollment, that the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal sought to develop a policy for dealing with the situation during the fall of 1975. The Major School Change Policy and a process designed to implement that policy were adopted by the School Board in May 1976. (2) The policy states that the involvement of local school communities shall be sought in examining the problem, in helping to find solutions, and in planning for the future. The process is designed to facilitate consultation with the local groups and to establish guidelines and parameters for the study.

The Protestant School Board had had, prior to 1975, some experience with school closings. Must of these were difficult, traumatic for everyone concerned and could not be described as positive in any way. Since the 1972-73 school year, school boards in Quebec have had a vehicle for community consultation in the form of School Committees and Parent Committees (3) established by legislation for all schools and school boards throughout the Province. By 1975, a number of school communities were talking about the declining school population in their locale and were raising questions about the future. They began to take initiatives directed toward developing recommendations which could be presented to the School Board. The parents, usually at the School Committee level, became aware of the lower registration through the study of some other issue such as the increase in split classes or the removal of such specialist services as music or art.

All of these factors led very naturally to the development of a policy which would tackle the problem in a positive way, involving the persons and groups most directly affected and hopefully arriving at solutions which were reasonable and acceptable. It was recognized right from the start that it would not be possible to reach a consensus in all instances. Conflict was expected but the process was designed to allow a certain amount of conflict to surface.

The Major School Change Policy instituted broad consultation around the issue of decline and reorganization but reserves the decision-making right and responsibility for the elected School Board.

Process Initiation and Description.

During the first two years of experience with the policy, a specific criterion was used to initiate a study in a school. When the school's student population falls below 60% of capacity, the process is begun. (4) A single school may be involved in a study, however, when two or more schools in an area or community have reached the 60% figure, they are asked to study the problem individually as well as on a community-wide basis.

A community is informed of the impending study and is invited to participate. The project begins with a general meeting of parents at which they are given basic information related to their school situation. The Board's Planning Office provides enrollment data plus projections, operating costs, comparative costs, anticipated residential development and alternatives if the school were to close. The parent group is asked to form a study committee which may be made up of interested volunteers, or the study may be undertaken by the School Committee. The principal of the school and teachers are part of the group, and community service groups are asked for their input.

The study group's first step is to familiarize itself with data provided by the Planning Office. This will include population figures and forecasts, cost information, available services based on forecasts and educational alternatives. The opportunity exists for parents to challenge any of the data or to request additional clarification. The step by step process followed in the study (5) allows the group to become knowledgeable about and to assess each aspect of the school situation to be considered. These include demographic data, the pedagogical program, social and community needs, and financial data relative to that school. After each aspect is considered, the community group as well as the administrative team record their conclusion pertinent to that section, of the report.

Demographic data (Section I) is provided by the Planning Office but is often verified by the community group using its own resources. The educational program description and information is the responsibility of the principal and staff. The social considerations are developed largely by the community group. The financial information is provided by the School Board administrative team. The study group will gather additional relevant information such as pupil distribution in an area, community priorities relative to education and the social consequences of various alternatives and solutions. Wherever a group of schools are being studied in a given area or community, representatives of the local study groups come together on a regular basis to share the information they have gathered. This group attempts to look at the community-wide picture in order to develop solutions for the total community.

When the data collection is complete, alternatives are developed by the study groups and by the community-wide group if more than one school is involved. These alternative solutions are prioritized and presented to the parents at large, usually at a meeting, in order to inform them and to get a consensus. The parents will have had the background information given at the original meeting,interim reports from the study group and the final recommendations which the study group wishes to promulgate. The recommendations of the administrative team will also be presented. The recommendations are then forwarded to the School Board along with the data collected.

The School Board receives the report and listens to a verbal presentation made by administrators and parents at a sub-committee hearing. When there is consensus among administrators and parents, the Board may simply accept the total set of recommendations. Where differences, or opposite solutions are proposed by the two groups, the Board must accept one or the other or a modified plan. The School Board, consisting of 15 elected school commissioners, must make the final decision in each case at a public board meeting. The time frame involved between initiation and decision-making is approximately 10 months. (6) This is flexible depending upon the complexity of a given situation. The length of time is determined by the factors involved and the necessity to avoid undue pressure to complete the study. If a study has begun in the spring, it can be completed by late winter of the following school year and thus give ample time for followup and transition during the remaining months until the school year ends.

Personnel and Resources.

The administrative team referred to previously in this description consists of the Principal of the School, the Regional Director, (7) the Planning Officer, the Parent and Community Animator and the Director of Buildings and Grounds. This team's role is to act as a resource to the community study group and to prepare its own set of recommendations to the School Board. The recommendations developed by the team may be completed at an earlier stage than those of the community group and may then be part of the deliberations of the community study group. While the concerns of the administrative team are primarily those related to educational issues, the social considerations raised by the community are reflected in their recommendations.

Specifically, the services of the Planning Officer relate to basic school system data and information pertinent to that particular school. The Regional Director and Principal offer the primary educational background. The Director of Buildings and Grounds is able to give most of the information related to physical school facilities. The Parent and Community Animator is available to help the parents to conduct their study, to assist parents in finding sources of information within the school system and in the larger community, and to help the study group communicate with parents at large in order to keep them informed and to get feedback from them.

Other personnel within the school system who are resources to the study group are the teachers of the school, the Transportation Department and secretarial services. The teachers in the school appoint one or more of their number to participate in the study group. In addition, they will help the Principal to prepare the educational section of the report. The Transportation Department prepares maps and busing boundaries and provides cost estimates related to proposed busing of students.

The local municipality is a source of information on population statistics, zoning and proposed residential or commercial development. Social agencies and other community organizations are a valuable resource in seeking to define community needs and social issues related to the school and surrounding community. Real Estate companies operating in the area can also provide information on potential development as well as population turnover in single-family dwellings. The parent members themselves are in many respects the most valuable resource in the process.

They provide manpower and reflect the essential concerns and values prevalent in the community. They are the essential link to the parents and community. Ideally, about 10 - 15 parents should be part of the study group.

Description of Communities.

The following are descriptions of three school communities in which Major School Change Studies were conducted. In the case of two of them, Westbrook and Connaught, a single school was involved in study and in Dorval,four participated.

Westbrook: This school is located in St.Laurent, a sizeable residential and industrial municipality on the Island of Montreal. The school is located in a working class part of the municipality, surrounded almost entirely by apartment houses. The school had, until the year before the study began, been classified as an inner-city school, meaning that the socio-economic indexing of the community served by the school was quite low. It is one of several Protestant (8) elementary schools in St.Laurent.

Connaught: Located in Ville-Emard, a section of the city of Montreal, this school was classified as inner-city due to low Socio-economic indexing. The area is working class and consists primarily of single unit, duplex and triplex dwellings. The area is bounded by a canal, an aqueduct, an expressway and a park and large undeveloped land area. Connaught is the only Protestant school serving that area.

Dorval: Dorval is a municipality to the west of Montreal. It is primarily middle-class suburban and almost entirely residential. It's one major industry is the airport. The population is fairly homogeneous. There is a predominance of single unit homes in Dorval with a few apartment buildings. There are three Protestant elementary schools and one high school in Dorval.

The Process in Three Communities.

The first two descriptions follow the process in two individual school studies. The last description follows the study at the community-wide level involving a number of schools serving the same community.

Westbrook: A general meeting of parents was called in January 1977, to discuss the problem of declining enrollment at Westbrook. Since it was the only school seriously affected by this phenomenon in the immediate area, a study was to be confined to that school. Approximately 100 parents (potential = 150 families) attended the meeting. The problem was presented by the Principal who described the current situation and the projections. Westbrook had a student population of 229 (9) during the 1976-77 school year and a projected enrollment of 172 fir k977-78. With a decline below 225, the school would no longer be entitled to a full time principal according to Government norms. Some of the specialist services such as gym teacher, librarian and French specialist would also be reduced. There could be an increase in split classes. The cost of building operation was not augmented by any outside revenue through rental or shared use.

The Regional Director then presented the option which could be explored, namely to continue to operate the school but with a restricted program and a shared principal, finding co-tenants to share operating costs (thus reducing per capita costs but not changing the prospective educational service curtailment) or closing the school and amalgamating with another school nearby. She stated that the primary concern of the School Board and its administration is to provide a good educational program. The understanding that change could be disruptive to a community had led to the policy which allows for joint study by community and administration. The goal is to find viable solutions and to reach a consensus on a recommendation to be taken to the School Board for decision.

Parents raised questions about the social implication of possible amalgamation, about safety for children going to schools outside their neighbourhood, about how best to maintain the good qualities of the school and program which children now enjoy and about the possibility of attracting more children to the school.

These were to be discussed fully by the committee which was then formed. A dozen parents volunteered and the group was to be augmented by a member of the staff and interested community organizations.

The first committee meeting was held in February with 15 persons present including the Principal, a teacher and the Parent Anomator. Discussion began with a look at the process required in the study. It was agreed that sub-committees should consider the various aspects of the study such as demographic predictions, social implications, pedagogical services and finances. There was some resentment expressed at the fact that the future of the school centered on numbers of children. The question of sharing a principal, meaning annexation with another school was fully explored. The idea received quite negative reactions.

Social implications of change were given a rather full airing. Committee members spoke of the special role played by the school in the life of the children, and the special need for stability and sense of community that it filled in this primarily low income community. The sub-committee on this topic agreed to contact organizations and social agencies that might be interested in sharing space in the school. These included the Y.M.C.A. and the day nursery operated by a local college.

The next meeting took place in March with ten parents present plus two teachers, the Principal, Regional Director, Assistant Regional Director and Parent Animator. The first part of the session was dominated by a member who raised the problems of violence and vandalism in the large high schools and gave this as a good reason to maintain a small school. Another member had explored the demographic data presented by the Planning Office in order to verify its accuracy. He had spent some time with the Director of Town Planning for St_Laurent. There was no imminent residential or industrial development but the potential existed because of vacant land within the school's boundaries.

The results of discussions with community organizations on renting school space proved negative. The St.Laurent area is well-endowed with public facilities for recreational and social services. The Regional and Assistant Regional Director pointed out some facts that were not encouraging, and this, combined with the Committees' lack of positive results created a strong reaction on the part of parents present.

They accused the administrators of having made up their minds in advance. It was pointed out that even if this were so, the community study group had the right to present its own conclusions to the School Board.

The Parent Animator then suggested that it would be most appropriate to list the viable options open to the Westbrook community, to explore the pros and cons of each and to prioritize them. The possible options were 1. to keep the school open with a shared principal and 2. to amalgamate with a neighbouring school thus closing Westbrook. The Animator suggested a visit to the nearest school, Parkdale, and a meeting with the Principal.

A meeting of the Committee took place at Parkdale School in April. The Parkdale Principal, three teachers and two parents were present in addition to the Westbrook group and the Parent Animator. After a tour of the School, the Principal of Parkdale offered to answer questions about the school. He and the Parkdale teachers and parents were prepared to give information but would not try to sell amalgamation. He was asked to describe the current staff and program and to project how this would differ with the addition of Westbrook students. The following items were discussed: specialists and services in a possible combined school; integration of students and staff; safety in and around Parkdale; after school programs; parent involvement; lunch facilities; special classes; class sizes. The Principal pointed out that although adequate space and services are available, there is the prospect of music and art specialists in addition to gym, French and librarian, there would inevitably be some unforeseen problems.

The meeting was very informal and all those present participated in the discussion. Westbrook parents were relieved by the answers they heard and quite positive about the prospects of amalgamation. They spoke of whether or not it was advantageous to make the move immediately (at the end of the current school year) or after an interim step, such as a year of annexation.

At a subsequent meeting two weeks later at which ten parents, Principal of Westbrook, Principal of Parkdale and the Parent Animator were present, the parents began to discuss the visit to Parkdale. One parent who had not been present accused

the group of having made a decision. She was agitated by the enthusiasm shown by the others for Parkdale. Discussion centered on how a decision would be reached. They were concerned about whether the parent body would agree with their recommendations. The School Board would have to make the final decision. Discussion about the advantages of the Westbrook-Parkdale amalgamation indicated that the members were enthusistic about the idea and managed to convince the dissident parent. A straw vote showed the group unanimously in favor of amalgamation. Safety concerns were raised as all the children would be walking to Parkdale and the group insisted on School Board assurance that the hazards be minimized.

A general meeting of parents was planned and also a letter informing parents of the nature of the recommendations the Committee wished parents to consider. Final revisions to the Major School Change Report were made. The hope was expressed that Westbrook remain an educational facility and that community use might continue. There was a positive feeling about the recommendation tempered by some apprehension as to community reaction.

Approximately twenty-four parents and six teachers attended the general meeting in early May in addition to the Major School Change Committee, the Regional Director, the School Commissioner and the Parent Animator. The attendance was much lower than the first general meeting. The Committee's report with which the administrative team concurred was presented and questions were invited from the parents.

Open hostility was demonstrated by one parent, another clearly was opposed to the recommendations. The teachers tried to persuade the parents to oppose the plan. Most parents listened without making comments. One man who opposed the recommendations nevertheless praised the Committee for its hard work. A vote showed a strong majority in favor of the recommendations, although the number present constituted a small percentage of the parent body. However, all parents had received the proposal in a letter.

In this case a consensus of parent and administrative team recommendations were forwarded first to a standing sub-committee of the School Board. Two members of the parent committee and the Regional Director presented their findings. A debate on the merits of the recommendations followed in spite of the consensus and the support of the local commissioner. However, the sub-committee agreed to recommend the amalgamation of Westbrook and Parkdale to the School Board.

The two parents present,after having heard the debate,said they were now convinced that the solution had not been predetermined. The School Board put its stamp of approval on the amalgamation at its next regular public meeting.

Connaught School: A general meeting of parents was called in early March 1977 to discuss the problem of declining enrollment in the school. The meeting was attended by about sixty parents (potential 100 families), the Principal, the Vice Principal, the Regional Director, Assistant Regional Director and the Parent Animator. The parents were told that a Major School Change Study would take place and the process was described. Parents were well aware of the small number of students in the school (145) and some expressed concern about the split classes throughout the school.

Questions arose about possible alternatives to closing the school and what options there were. One parent pointed out that the schools in the neighbouring community were also low in enrollment. Connaught was described as an excellent facility. Parents asked whether or not a decision to close the school had already been made. They were assured that no decision would be made until their Committee had a chance to study the situation and make recommendations. Eight parents volunteered to work on the Committee.

The first Committee meeting took place later in March. The eight parents were joined by an additional six members of the School Committee. Present also were the Principal, Vice Principal, Regional Director, School Commissioner and Parent Animator. The study and report format were reviewed in addition to options which the group might explore. Again, considerable skepticism was expressed as to the School Board's motives. However, a number of parents seemed ready to tackle the study. The community, its services and facilities were discussed. About six parents agreed to explore the community to find out if social services could be located in the school. This was considered because of the geographic nature of the community, not primarily to augment revenue. If the school could be shown to meet a number of community needs in a section cut off from neighbouring areas, this might offer some sound reasons to maintain it.

In April, the Committee met with the Principal, Vice Principal, School Commissioner, Regional Director, Assistant Regional Director and Parent Animator present. Committee members reported that existing community services were not only adequate but all suitably located. There seemed to be no need to locate in the school. The demographic data provided by the planning office seemed to be accurate. No development was possible in the area, the only vacant land available was in neighbouring Lasalle. The Committee concluded however that the Metro extension might bring an influx of families.

The pedagogical program was reviewed and parents present expressed reasonable satisfaction with the existing program. Since the student population was already extremely low, the school was already annexed (sharing a Principal) with a permanent Vice Principal who would be removed the following year because of further decline. Split classes prevailed, and very little specialist service was available. The excellent condition of the building was compared by parents to the poorer condition of the nearby schools in Verdun. Photos were provided by one parent. The operating cost of the building was discussed. Because half the building was rented to a Special Education school, the operating deficit was small.

Parents then discussed options should the school close. There was clear resistance to having children attend the Verdun schools which were closest. The dangerous aqueduct crossing as well as a dislike of that community were the reasons given. The Animator suggested they look at all the neighbouring schools before the next meeting. Several parents agreed to explore these schools. This group met with the Animator and Principal to compile their findings. They had visited four schools. Two in Verdun were within walking distance, although across the aqueduct, and the two others would require busing. The Verdun schools were described as physically inferior and no enthusiasm was expressed for any of the four.

The Committee met in May with the Principal, Vice Principal and the Animator in order to complete the report. The study conclusion was incomplete because the group felt that no plan could be offered without studies in the two Verdun schools which were also declining rapidly. The Administrative team concurred with this. The various sub-sections of the report

were completed and the recommendation to the School Board was that Connaught be considered as part of an area-wide study. This final meeting ended positively when the members realized that their position was supported by the Administrators. Connaught School did participate in an area-wide study during the 1977-78 school year. Upon completion of that study, the Connaught group asked that they be allowed to remain open because of their location while the Administrative team recommended the closing of the school. The School Board decided to allow the school to continue for at least one more year.

Dorval Schools: The parents in the three Dorval Elementary Schools (Dorval Gardens, Surrey Gardens and Courtland Park) had begun to look at the problem of declining student enrollment in their community in 1976, before the School Board had adopted its policy. Having stumbled upon the fact that the decline was taking place through another study on French Immersion, they decided to look into the matter. They took the initiative to invite the High School parents and various School Board personnel. This action coincided with the adoption of the Major School Change Policy.

Two of the three elementary schools, Surrey Gardens and Dorval Gardens, were included on the list of schools to be studied. The main focus of study during the winter months of the 1976-77 school year were these two schools. Surrey Gardens was the smaller school with a student population of 143. Dorval Gardens had a population of 245 including 81 students enrolled in Grade 7 French Immersion program. The two schools shared a principal. The study groups in both schools looked at their particular situations in line with the study format. Dorval Gardens had by Spring 1977, entered into negotiations with the town which wished to rent unused space in the school for a geriatric clinic. Half of Surrey Gardens was rented to a private high school. Both Committees expressed the wish to come together on a community-wide basis in order to come up with recommendations which best suited the whole student population and which could serve future needs.

Courtland Park School Committee agreed that although Courtland Park was not under study, representatives of all three schools should meet as they had done before. The three schools had equal representation. Included in the meetings were the Principals and Parent Animator, and occasionally the Regional Director. The representatives of each school reviewed their own set of statistics for the others. Those from Surrey Gardens indicated an emerging realization that their numbers did not insure the best possible educational program. They were concerned however that the closing of their school might cut off community access to the building. Since it is the only public building in that part of the community, parents wanted some assurances about this.

Options were discussed and it became apparent that six options for elementary reorganization were feasible. A procedure for communicating these options and getting community reaction was developed. Concern was expressed over the absence of the high school parents. It was decided that they should be invited to participate so that good communication and comprehensive planning could take place. High school parents were present at subsequent meetings. The elementary schools prepared a list of pros and cons from their own perspective for each of the six options. The group reached consensus on the preferred options.

Surrey Gardens School should be closed in June, 1978, the Courtland Park (a French Immersion and English School) English stream should transfer to Dorval Gardens along with the students from Surrey Gardens. These options were to be taken back to the respective schools for approval.

When the representatives of the four schools met again, it was apparent that the Courtland Park parents did not approve the transfer of their English stream. However, the group felt that since the recommendations were for change one year from the coming September, the community might acquiesce, particularly since the political situation in Quebec could produce a more rapid decline than was projected. It was agreed that the recommendations would be reviewed and forwarded to the School Board in the fall since there were no recommendations for change in the offing for the next school year. The administrative team agreed with this proposal.

A general meeting of Surrey Gardens parents during May 1977 did produce controversy over the proposal that the school should close. The Study Committee had based its conclusion on the increasing loss of educational services in a very small and still declining school. They described the educational program possible if the Surrey Gardens students were combined with the other English stream students in Dorval. Two vocal parents insisted that there must be another way and since the recommendations did not mean immediate change or action they proposed to study the situation further. The majority of the 60 parents present agreed to give them that chance.

By September, 1977, it was indeed evident that the dramatic decline that was feared had begun. The elementary school population in Dorval stood at 700, a drop of 100 students or about 12%. The previous year the percentage of decline was about 7.5%. The High School figures were roughly the same. The Planning Office then informed the Community through the Regional Director that a Major School Change Study would be required for the entire community, although the Courtland Park School with a population of 388 would not be officially under study.

A series of community-wide, meetings paralleling the individual school studies took place with equal representation from each of the four schools and with Principals, Regional Director, Planning Officer, School Commissioner and Parent Animator present at various times. The first of these meetings dealt with a review of the studies in Dorval to date and the up-to-date demographic data. Parents from the various schools began to look at some of the possible options for the future in view of the new data. Both the community groups and the Administrative team began to look at all the feasible options, itemizing the functional and dysfunctional aspects of each.

They asked the Administrative team to present what they would consider to be the best plan which would also be a long term solution. Parents expressed the wish to avoid numerous changes in the community, something they now saw as a possibility, given the increasing percentage of decline. (10)

The presentation of the Administrative team's solutions were received by the community-wide study group in January 1978. The solution highest on the list which responded to the request for a long range plan was the most drastic in terms of change. It proposed using the high school building to house the entire elementary program and to transfer the high school program to a neighbouring community, thus amalgamating with another high school. The other options involved various combinations of elementary organization and the status quo for the high school. The response to the first option was one of shock, although the group had requested a long term plan. Opposition was strongest from the high school group but they persuaded the majority of others to support their position. It remained for the group to make their proposals for School Board consideration.

Tensions in the Community were very strong at this stage. They were aggravated by a number of high school teachers who were determined to save the high school and convinced the majority of parents that the declining number of secondary students would not force a diluted program. As a result the plan which the School Board passed was the least dramatic and one supported by the School Commissioner for that area and the vast majority of the Community.

Surrey Gardens, the smallest elementary school, would close in June, 1978 as the original plan had suggested and students would be able to go to either of the two other elementary schools. The School Board, however, left the option for further study open. (11)

Evaluation.

During the first year after the Major School Change Policy was adopted, nine schools in five different communities were involved in studies. Studies during the 1977-78 school year involved 20 schools in seven communities. Ten of the latter had begun the process in the spring of 1977. Some of the schools were involved because change or closing of a neighbouring school could have an effect on them. Study committees were usually made up of about 12 parents. All groups faced with serious decline

had a heavy measure of emotion to deal with in their approach to the problem. In each case the negative aspects of possible change had to be worked through by the group before positive solutions began to emerge. Parents were consistent in their participation in every committee over the two year period with one exception. (12)

Groups met on an average of six times each over a five month period during the first year. Three schools began the process with a general meeting of parents. The only community-wide study took place in Dorval and this was the result of community initiative. Relatively few teachers participated and no community organizations were directly involved. One school, Westbrook, was closed at the end of the first year.

Experience with the process after one year led to a number of observations and subsequent recommendations for change in the process. Some communities were alive with rumours about the future of the school once a study had begun. This was prevalent only in those communities where the process was introduced to the School Committee only and not to the general parent body. The rumours persisted for months. As a result it was decided that all studies should begin with a general meeting of parents, assuring more accurate information and wider representation on the study committee. Data provided by the Administrative team was not always available in time and this produced serious gaps. It was therefore recommended that all data be provided at the beginning of a study.

Very little outside community involvement was evidenced. Community organizations or agencies were consulted but only in one case was an agency drawn into the work of the study committee. It was considered advantageous to seek more direct input from these groups. Teacher participation was limited and it was felt that more involvement, particularly in the preparation of pedagogical data, could be useful. Principals had to play a key role for which they were not necessarily prepared. Principals as the most visible Board representatives were often the target of attack when parents complained that the Board had made a decision in advance. Principals would gain from advance help and support from colleagues who had already been involved in the process.

The experience with the process in Dorval where several schools worked together proved to be a positive one. The four schools brought different perspectives and compelled each to be aware of the concerns of the others. A wider sense of community was in operation, more options were developed and discussed and recommendations favored all groups. This format was strongly recommended wherever several schools in an area were under study.

Evaluation after the second year of experience with the policy brought additional recommendations for modification. Input for the evaluation was received from individuals involved with the studies, from commissioners and from the Central Parents Committee. Some serious problems arose in the final stage of the process in the case of two schools. There were approximately two weeks between the hearings of the Board's sub-committee and the public meeting of the School Board. Recommendations by the sub-committee went against the wishes of two schools and there was too much time in between for lobbying and strong pressure tactics. Community groups were mobilized in an attempt to reverse the tide. Eight schools out of a total of 20 under study were closed during the second year, two ended in conflict. It is possible that reduction of time between the hearings and the School Board's decision may further reduce tension.

The report document itself was simplified and terms clarified. The ten month time frame is now recommended except in certain cases. Whenever the study was rushed, unnecessary tensions arose. In order to avoid misunderstanding, School Committees and Principals must be informed in writing of impending study, this to be followed by the general meeting for parents. Principals and School Committee Chairmen are invited to seminars organized for sharing data and information prior to the beginning of studies. Roles have been more clearly defined in order to reduce pressure on personnel, particularly Principals. The public should be informed in advance of the number of schools the Board expects to close, and communities should be informed if the feasible options for a particular school are limited.

Once a decision is made the community should be informed in writing and given the reasons for it. When schools are closed, receiving schools should organize meetings, visits and prepare information for new parents. Welcoming activities should be arranged for students, teachers and parents. School staff should be given a timetable and be informed of their responsibilities for the closing procedure.

There is clear consensus that while the Major School Change Policy and process will require ongoing evaluation and modification, and although it is very demanding of human resources, it is a necessary and worthwhile process. (13). The process is not always a smooth one but it reduces conflict while not eliminating it entirely. It facilitates problem-solving by bringing together resources inside and outside the employ of the School Board. The process of study produces knowledgeable parents, well-informed in areas of curriculum, finances and school organization. In spite of disappointments in some of the outcomes, parents have expressed satisfaction with their participation and with the fairness of the policy. The Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal can anticipate greater support from communities that are informed, that have had input in the decision-making and therefore inevitably feel more committed to the course of action chosen.

Gaby Ostro.
June, 1978.

NOTES

1. Quebec schools with less than 225 students are not entitled to a principal. The status of Calgary Catholic schools falling below 90 (elementary) or 150 (Junior high) is reviewed annually by their school board.

2. The P.S.B.G.M. Major School Change Policy, pages 2 and 3, Appendix A.

3. School Committees and Parent Committees were established with the enactment of Bill 27. Appendix B.

4. Current criteria under consideration include loss of the principal, high per capita cost of operation exceeding the norm by 20% or more, as well as enrollment below 60% of capacity.

5. Study format, see pages 5 - 18, Appendix A.

6. Time frame is developed with the community by setting a deadline and acceptable interim dates, page 4, Appendix A.

7. Regional Directors are senior administrative officers responsible for a region consisting of approximately 30 schools.

8. Quebec public school boards are divided along denominational lines, Catholic schools serving all Roman Catholic students and Protestant schools serving all non-Catholic students.

9. This figure does not include 26 students in a newly opened Francophone wing, grades K - 6. The experiment to develop a Francophone program had not attracted enough students to allow its continuation.

10. The P.S.B.G.M. projected rate of overall decline is pegged at 10% due to recent language legislation as well as the current birth rate.

11. Dorval High School, with a projected enrollment of less than 400 students, grades 7 through 11, is continuing a Major School Change Study at School Board request.

12. Riverside School, an inner-city school with 60 children, grades K - 3, had only 2 or 3 parents working consistently on the study, due either to the nature of the community or the small population from which the committee could be drawn.

13. Recent editorials, Montreal Star, Appendix C.

APPENDIX A

MAJOR SCHOOL CHANGE STUDY

For: _____
school

And with a secondary influence on:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Date of submission to the School Board _____

THE PROTESTANT SCHOOL BOARD OF GREATER MONTREAL
BUREAU DES ECOLES PROTESTANTES DU GRAND MONTREAL

The following individuals acted as key representatives of (a) the community, and (b) the School Board Administrative Team in preparing this study.

(a) The Community

Name	Address

(b) The School Board Administrative Team

Name	Function

Information concerning, or copies of the 'Major School Change Study' can be obtained from PSBGM Planning Office.

GENERAL POLICY

MAJOR SCHOOL CHANGE

THE BACKGROUND -

Declining school enrollment is a problem facing communities all over North America. The Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal is taking a close look at its own situation, and is involving the community in developing solutions.

When a school's population falls below a certain level, effects are felt in virtually every area of school life. A small school cannot offer the varied services that are common in larger schools. It cannot be as well equipped, have as many specialists, or be entitled to the same administrative services. Budget allowances for building maintenance are also reduced.

Offsetting these problems are the many advantages of having a neighbourhood school. Transportation problems are few; children can go home for lunch; extra-curricular activities are more easily organized. Perhaps most important is the fact that a neighbourhood school can more easily adapt its programme to the character and needs of the community.

On September 30, 1975 the PSBGM had some 14,000 surplus pupil-places. A good deal of this excess space is being put to good use as resource areas and work rooms, but there is still a significant number of schools that have reached the point where, from both an educational and an economic viewpoint, they are not functioning as well as they could.

A similar situation is likely to arise in several other schools in the next few years. It was with these facts in mind that the PSBGM began developing a policy for major school changes. The policy that the Board has adopted is designed to provide a way for the school community --- if it wishes --- to become fully involved in the process of studying its own situation and arriving at solutions.

The Major School Change Policy was adopted at a regular meeting of the PSBGM on May 26, 1976.

THE POLICY -

1. When the rate of use of a facility reaches approximately 60% of the optimum rate of use (80% of usable capacity for elementary schools and 85% for high schools) it will be necessary to begin the planning process for major school change.

2. The planning process for a major school change is a study of a school and its community that will ultimately result in the decision to:

(a) continue to operate a school which has a rate of use which is below 60% but with restricted services, and with a modified program; or,

(b) continue to operate a school along with other users of the school building who will help to defray costs; or,

(c) close a school and transfer the students to other PSBGM schools.

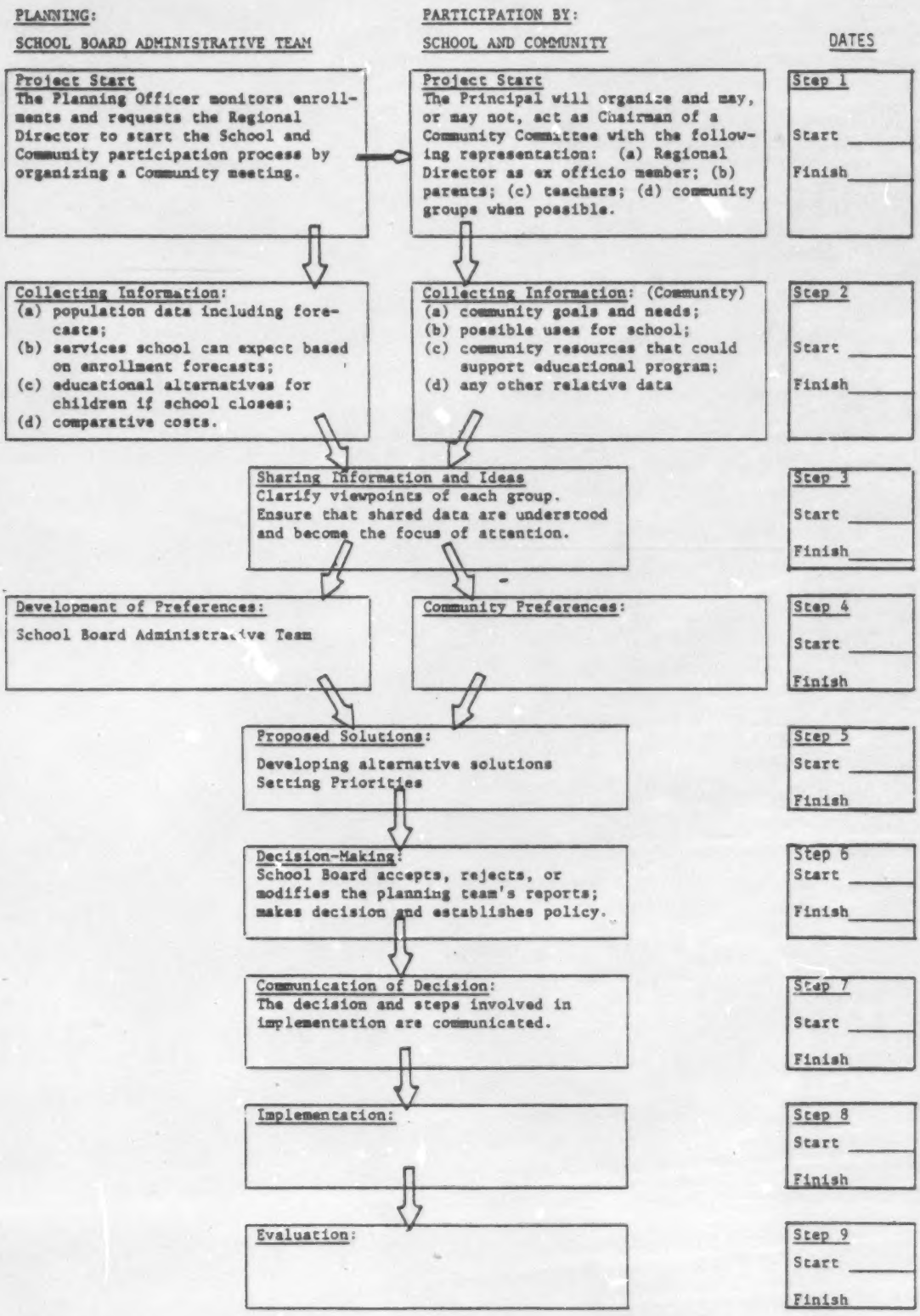
3. The community will be adequately informed of the impending study of a major school change and be encouraged to participate in the study.

4. If a community, after exhaustive efforts to involve it in participation in the planning process indicates that it does not want to be involved, the planning process will proceed without the community participation.

5. The planning process will require some skills development and leadership in the areas of community animation: data collection, data use, the development of alternatives within a group, and finally arriving at consensus. To this end appropriate human resources should be made available.

6. The Board will make the decision concerning a major school change after it receives the report from the planning process and in keeping with its responsibilities under Section 224 of the Statutes of Education.

MAJOR SCHOOL CHANGE PROCESS



PSBGM PLANNING OFFICE
78-05-25

SECTION I

DEMOGRAPHIC STUDIES

The demographic studies are divided into two parts.

The first part of Section I, that is, pages 6a, 6b, 6c, etc. are the enrollment projections for the schools that are involved in the study. This data will be supplied by the Planning Officer.

The second part of Section I examines the community to assess whether or not there could be changes in community structure which could influence school enrollment in the future.

SECTION I

2. Projected residential development over next ten year period within the school(s) Community.

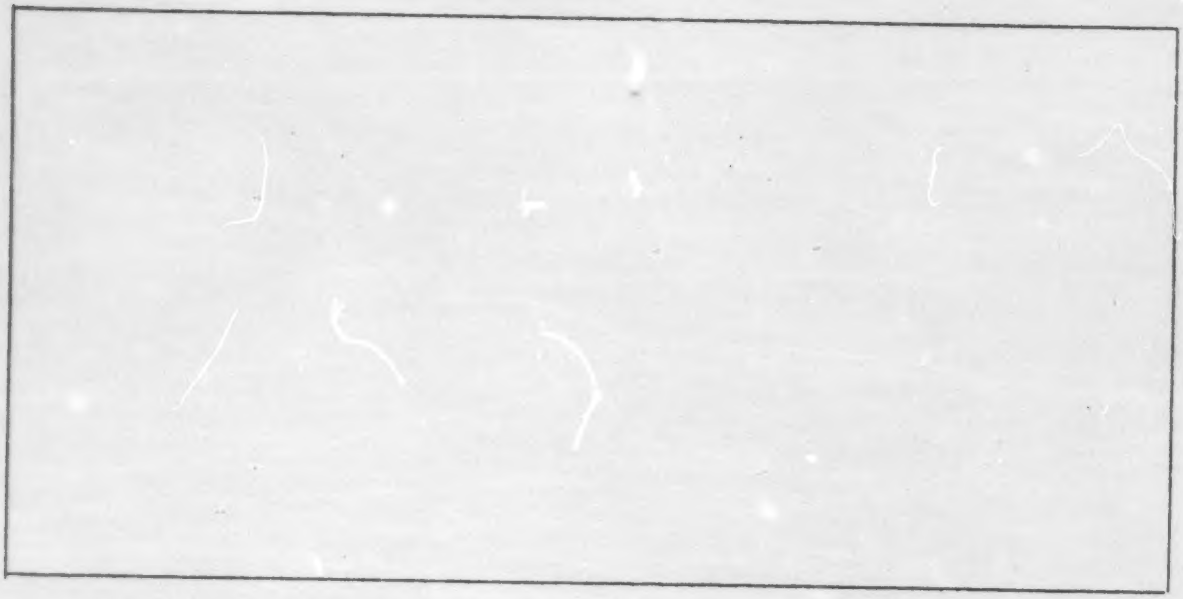
3. Projected trends of the population movement within the community.

4. Population prediction of _____ School

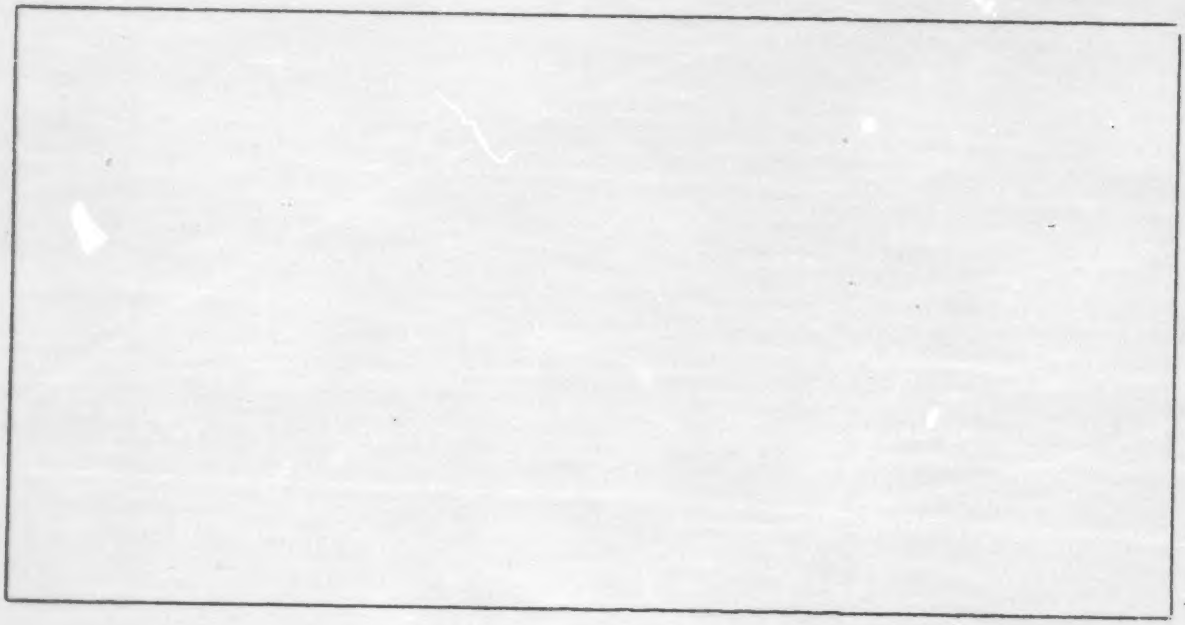
1978		
1980		
1981		
1985		

3. CONCLUSIONS

(a) School Board Administrative Team



(b) Community



SECTION II

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM
(data to be provided largely from the School Board)

1. What is your assessment of the influence of the enrollment changes as projected/predicted on the educational program?

2. What is your assessment of the enrollment changes as projected/predicted on the school services? (for example: secretarial services, specialists, consultants).

CONCLUSIONS

1. School Board Administrative Team

2. Community

SECTION III

SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS
(data to be provided largely from the community)

1. In what manner does this school play a unique role in the social life of the student? Unique in the sense that the school or the community have special or unusual characteristics.

2. In what manner does the school provide special social resources in the community?

3. What community needs now and in the future could the school serve?

CONCLUSIONS

1. Community

2. School Board Administrative Team

SECTION IV

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

(data to be provided largely from School Board)

1. What is your analysis of the influence of the projected/predicted enrollments on the operational budgets for:

(a) The Educational Program

(b) The Support Services (secretarial, librarians, etc.).

(c) The Maintenance of the School Building and Grounds? (cleaning, maintaining, heated, lighting, etc.).

(d) Food Services and Transportation

2. What is your analysis of the influence of the projected/predicted enrollments on capital investments for the school?

(a) Educational
(facilities, furniture, equipment).

(b) School Buildings and Grounds

3. CONCLUSIONS

(a) School Board Administrative Team

(b) Community

SECTION V

ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

In Section I the enrollment projections were studied.
In Section II the influence of enrollment changes on the educational program was studied.
Section III examined the special social influences of the school in the community.
Section IV looked at financial considerations in the changing enrollment situation.

With this data in mind, alternative solutions for educational services in the future should be presented. When the alternatives are listed the next task will be to arrange the alternatives in order of priority. The School Board Administrative Team and the Community Study Group will each place the alternatives in order of priority. Ideally, there will be agreement in the order of priority.

ALTERNATIVE 1.

ALTERNATIVE 2.

ALTERNATIVE 3.

PRIORITIES

School Board Administrative Team

	Priority
Alternative 1	
Alternative 2	
Alternative 3	

Community Study Group

	Priority
Alternative 1	
Alternative 2	

DISCUSSION AND JUSTIFICATION OF PRIORITIES

School Board Administrative Team

Community

SECTION VI

FUTURE OF THE SCHOOL

1. School Board Decision and Resolution

2. Follow-up Proposals

§ 3.– *Des comités d'écoles et des comités de parents*

§ 3.– *School committees and parents' committees*

APPENDIX B

Education Act as amended by Bill 27

Comités d'écoles et de parents.

66. *Avant le 15 octobre de chaque année, le directeur ou le responsable de chaque école administrée par une commission scolaire ou une commission régionale convoque une assemblée générale des parents des enfants qui fréquentent telle école afin d'y former, avant cette date, un comité d'école.*

School and parents' committees.

66. *Before the 15th of October each year, the principal or the person responsible for each school administered by a school board or a regional board shall call a general meeting of the parents of the children who attend such school to establish therein a school committee, before such date.*

Membres du comité d'école.

Le directeur ou le responsable de l'école et un représentant désigné par les instituteurs de l'école sont membres du comité d'école; ils n'ont toutefois pas le droit d'y voter ni d'en être nommés président.

The principal or the person responsible for the school and one representative designated by the teachers of the school shall be members of the school committee but shall not be entitled to vote thereon or be appointed chairman thereof.

Members of the school committee.

(*) Cet amendement a effet aux fins de l'année scolaire 1972/1973 et des années scolaires subséquentes. (Lois de 1971, Bill 27, a. 126.)

(*) This amendment shall have effect for the purposes of the 1972/1973 school year and subsequent school years. (Statutes of 1971, Bill 27, s. 126.)

Non membres.

Les commissaires ou syndics d'écoles de la commission scolaire ou de la commission régionale qui administre cette école ne peuvent cependant être membres de ce comité d'école. Lois de 1971, Bill 27, a. 18. (*)

Not members.

The school commissioners or trustees of the school board or of the regional board which administers such school cannot, however, be members of such school committee. Statutes of 1971, Bill 27, s. 18. (*)

Fonctions.

67. *Tout comité d'école a pour fonctions:*

a) de stimuler par des moyens appropriés la participation des parents et du milieu en général à l'amélioration des services éducatifs de l'école;

b) d'étudier les mesures susceptibles de favoriser la personnalisation des services éducatifs de l'école;

c) de faire à la direction de l'école toute recommandation propre à assurer le meilleur fonctionnement possible de l'école. Lois de 1971, Bill 27, a. 18. (*)

Functions.

67. *Every school committee shall have the following functions:*

(a) to stimulate by appropriate means participation by parents and the community generally in the improvement of educational services in the school;

(b) to study measures likely to promote more personal educational services in the school;

(c) to make to the administrators of the school any recommendation to ensure the best possible operation of the school. Statutes of 1971, Bill 27, s. 18. (*)

Comité de parents.

68. *Un comité de parents est institué auprès de chaque commission scolaire ou commission régionale; il est composé des présidents de chaque comité d'école.*

Parents' Committees.

68. *A parents' committee is established for each school board or regional board; it shall consist of the chairman of each school committee.*

Fonctions.

Tout comité de parents a pour fonctions:

a) d'assurer la concertation nécessaire au bon fonctionnement des comités d'école;

b) de transmettre à la commission scolaire l'expression des besoins identifiés par les comités d'école et de canaliser vers elle les recommandations de portée générale;

c) de promouvoir la participation des parents à toutes les activités de la commission scolaire et de désigner notamment à cette fin, parmi ceux-ci, le cas échéant, les membres requis pour les divers comités formés par la commission scolaire;

d) de recommander à la commission scolaire toute mesure susceptible d'améliorer l'administration et la gestion des écoles. Lois de 1971, Bill 27, a. 18. (*)

Functions.

Every parents' committee shall have the following functions:

(a) to ensure such cooperation as is necessary for the proper operation of the school committees;

(b) to express to the school board such needs as are identified by the school committees and direct recommendations of a general scope to it;

(c) to promote participation by parents in all activities of the school board and to designate especially for such purpose, from among them, if need be, the members required for the various committees established by the school board;

(d) to recommend to the school board any measure that may improve the administration and management of the schools. Statutes of 1971, Bill 27, s. 18. (*)

Composition par règlement.

69. *La composition des comités d'école de même que les modalités de mise en place, de fonctionnement et de financement de ces comités et des comités de parents sont déterminées par règlement du lieutenant-gouverneur en conseil.* Lois de 1971, Bill 28, a. 18. (*)

Composition by regulation.

69. *The composition of the school committees and the terms and conditions of the establishment, operation and financing of such committees and of the parents' committees shall be determined by regulation of the Lieutenant-Governor in Council.* Statutes of 1971, Bill 27, s. 18. (*)

"Parent" et "école".

70. *Aux fins des articles 66 à 69, le mot "parent" désigne le père, la mère et, à leur défaut, le gardien d'un enfant inscrit à une école le 30 septembre précédent, et le mot "école" désigne un ou plusieurs groupements d'enfants et d'instituteurs sous l'autorité d'un seul directeur ou d'un seul responsable s'il n'y a pas de directeurs.* Lois de 1971, Bill 27, a. 18. (*)

"Parent" and "school".

70. *For the purposes of sections 66 to 69, the word "parent" means the father, mother or, failing them, the guardian of a child enrolled in a school on the preceding 30th of September, and the word "school" means one or more groups of children and teachers under one principal or one person responsible, if there is no principal.* Statutes of 1971, Bill 27, s. 18. (*)

The Montreal Star SATURDAY, MAY 28, 1977

The right way

CLOSING A SCHOOL because of decreased enrolments is never easy. Such a decision can provoke hostility between parents and school board officials. It can harm the morale of teachers. It can disrupt the comfortable routine of children and cause them to travel greater distances. But, in the case of Westbrook elementary school in St. Laurent, the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal has demonstrated a positive approach to what might otherwise have been a painful and provocative move.

Enrolment at Westbrook has been falling in recent years. This year's registration was 229 pupils. Forecasts indicated a continuing decrease to 130 pupils by 1981. Maintaining the school was no longer feasible.

It would have been easy for the board to have ruled on the question unilaterally and imposed a solution. Instead, it set up a committee whose members included 16 parents from the community and officers of the PSBGM to explore the issue and find a mutually acceptable solution. With the added co-operation of teachers, principals and the local board member, a decision was made, albeit reluctantly, to close Westbrook and transfer the pupils to Parkdale, another school in the district.

Although this might appear to be an isolated case, school closings are a problem facing many boards across this continent because of declining enrolments. The Montreal Catholic School Commission, for example, has announced that 19 of its schools will be shut down as of this summer.

But how a board goes about dealing with such a vexing matter can make all the difference in how affected individuals — children and adults — respond. The spirit of co-operation that will enable Westbrook's pupils to transfer with the least disruption next September is a model that ought to be emulated.

A6

The Montreal Star
ESTABLISHED 1869
FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 1978

Model conduct

MONTREAL'S Protestant school authorities are handling with great sensitivity and delicacy the unpleasant task of closing schools. Closings are decided on a few at a time. Parents' groups are given abundant opportunity to study and comment on the various possibilities while the officials are studying them. The board makes its decision on a particular closing only after the parents and the staff have had a chance to voice their objections before the board at a public meeting.

The parents may not be satisfied when their school gets closed just the same, but they cannot help feeling that the board has given them a full and fair hearing and is being reasonable.

It is a time-consuming business, as democratic procedures generally are. It is also a model of how well local government can function, even in a big city, even in dealing with difficult and complex issues.

APPENDIX C